

**OZIAS LEDUC ET SON DERNIER
GRAND ŒUVRE**

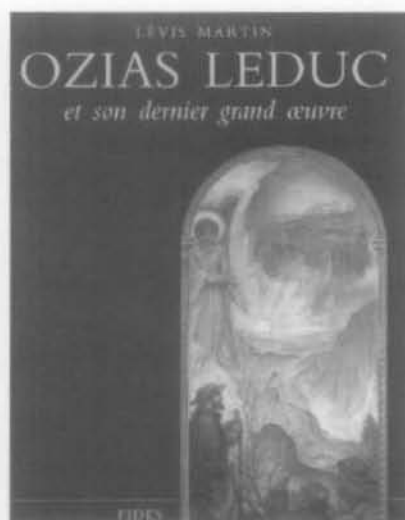
Lévis MARTIN

Montréal: Fides, 1996

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Ozias Leduc was the pre-eminent church decorator in Québec in this century. During a distinguished career that spanned seven decades he carried out over thirty commissions in and beyond Québec. However, Leduc's religious art is the least known and appreciated aspect of his body of work, as Lévis Martin notes with regret in this recent publication. Only two of the many academic studies on Leduc since the 1970s have concentrated specifically on his church commissions. Laurier Lacroix wrote his Master's thesis (Université de Montréal, 1973) on the murals in the chapel of the Bishop's Palace in Sherbrooke; Craig Stirling followed with his thesis (Concordia University, 1981) on the interior of the Church of Saint-Hilaire, a study which was published in 1985.¹ Now Martin's monograph, with a foreword by Lacroix, brings attention to Leduc's last major decoration, the interior of the Church of Notre-Dame-de-la-Présentation in Shawinigan-Sud.

Shawinigan-Sud (or Almaville-en-bas as it was then called) was a small but rapidly growing industrial town in 1941 when Leduc, at the age of 76, accepted curé Arthur Jacob's proposal to decorate his modest parish



church. Leduc completed all but one of the fifteen large, main murals and the many auxiliary elements of the programme before he died aged 90 in 1955. His remarkable achievement is certainly worthy of recognition and serious study. This was Leduc's culminating work which, as Lacroix suggests, can be seen as a final synthesis of his art. The iconographic programme is a significant and provocative visual document of the social doctrine of the Catholic Church in the turbulent years of "la grande noirceur" before the Quiet Revolution. But Martin's book lacks substance and detail and will not satisfy those looking for incisive scrutiny of this commission. Addressed to a general audience, it is intended to generate interest in the site. Much like a guide book, it serves simply as a useful, basic introduction to the artist and the decoration.

The publication was initiated by the parish Comité de protection des oeuvres d'Ozias Leduc de Shawinigan-Sud as part of its mandate to protect and promote the murals. In 1975 the parish succeeded in having the paintings officially designated as provincial cultural patrimony. Since then, the committee has overseen extensive restoration of the church interior and has sponsored several projects to encourage tourism and public interest. The largest event was *La passion mauricienne*, an award-winning sound and light show centering on the murals, which was presented during the summer, from 1988 to 1990. Martin's involvement with the parish dates from 1977 when he organized a local exhibition of Leduc's preparatory sketches.

Martin's *Présentation* readily acknowledges that he has not produced an academic study. He states that Fides, the publisher, wanted a book with a broadly accessible text and price. The author makes no pretense of objectivity; he describes his approach as "celle d'un admirateur qui croyait le temps venu de faire état d'une sublime réalisation encore trop mal connue et de faire partager son émotion à un large public" (p.12). His text is an homage to Leduc written in an adulatory tone and spiked with quotations from other admirers. The book fulfills its stated purpose. It is well organized and easy to read; it begins with a short biogra-

phy of the artist and history of the commission followed by a lengthy but conventional theological interpretation of the programme. Martin expands on the explanation of the murals presented by curé Jacob in his 1960 booklet *Légendes des tableaux de la décoration en l'église Notre-Dame de la Présentation d'Almaville*.² He has also made use of archival material, studies, periodical articles, and interviews with Gabrielle Messier, Leduc's assistant on the project, and curé Jacob; a bibliography is also included. The strength of the book rests in its survey of the murals and the generous use of illustrations (many in colour) which fill almost half the volume, making images of every part of the ensemble available for the first time. However, some of the illustrations, especially those placed in the margins of the text, are too small to be useful. The book's greatest weaknesses are the lack of critical analysis and the lack of contextualization in the history of the period.

The background section on Leduc is cursory and presents a one-dimensional portrait of this profoundly complex man. Martin concentrates excessively on Leduc's spiritual nature without adequate regard for his philosophical and social concerns which inform his mural compositions. Throughout the entire text he perpetuates the legendary image of Leduc as an unworldly sage, at times elevating him to a God-like figure. For example,

he compares "le vieux sage de Saint-Hilaire" with the majestic image of God the Father in his painting of the Trinity (p.20) and refers to Leduc as an "Ancient des Jours" (p.157). He gives a limited overview of only the very early and very late periods of Leduc's career, illustrated with a few examples of his easel paintings. The mature style of the Shawinigan murals is traced to Leduc's encounter with Symbolism and Art Nouveau during a pivotal trip to Europe in 1897 while preparing for his decoration of the Saint-Hilaire church. In a short formal analysis of the Saint-Hilaire interior, Martin demonstrates how Leduc began to adopt a more modern decorative style to evoke the spiritual essence of his images. Regarding the artist's late period, Martin looks at his work just prior to and during the Shawinigan project. Martin includes examples of Leduc's secular art and paintings commissioned by Abbé Albert Tessier, such as the devotional image *Mater Amabilis* (1941) and representations of the early Jesuit missionary Père Jacques Buteux (1936-37). Tessier, of Trois-Rivières, was a historian, teacher and patron of the Écoles ménagères, who used art as propaganda.

Martin's history of the commission provides glimpses of material that could have yielded a more revealing analysis of the issues related to the awarding of this contract to Leduc. Curé Jacob sought advice from emi-

nent clerics with an interest in art, in particular, Abbé Tessier and another of Leduc's friends, Mgr. Olivier Maurault, Rector of the Université de Montréal. Art historian Père Julien Déziel, who was also consulted, suggested but then immediately discounted Paul-Émile Borduas as a possible candidate. Martin speculates that Borduas's independent and less conciliatory temperament made him an unsuitable choice, providing the reader with just a hint of the hardening factionalization in the arts community.

Conflicts intensified in 1941, exacerbated by Père Marie-Alain Courturier's advocacy of a modern, universalist religious art³ and his controversial support for Borduas and his colleagues. Leduc's views on sacred art, like those of Courturier and Borduas, were influenced by Maurice Denis and Jacques Maritain; but at this late period in his career, his idealism was closer to traditionalism and his meticulous, symbolist-inspired style was regarded as outdated by younger modernists. Yet Leduc continued to straddle modern and traditional factions; his admirers ranged from Borduas to ultraconservative nationalists such as René Bergeron, author of *Art et bolchevisme* (1946).⁴ Leduc's art, his reputation and his links to clerical-nationalists such as Maurault and Tessier, made him a prudent choice for curé Jacob. Although Leduc was elderly and gravely ill at the time, Martin merely states that Jacob

"took a risk" and hired Leduc because he felt unqualified to choose anyone else and because Leduc would be assisted by Gabrielle Messier at no extra cost (p.38). Martin attributes Leduc's decision to accept this major undertaking, despite his ill health, to his desire to fulfill his own spiritual quest:

Dans ces audacieux défi proposé par le curé Jacob, Leduc, pour sa part, y voyait-il comme l'intervention d'un homonyme biblique qui pouvait présager une réponse personnelle à son "combat avec l'ange" (Gn 32)? espérer la résolution qu'il poursuivait de cette dichotomie entre le matériel et le spirituel?...Lui était-il enfin offert un échelle de Jacob qui lui permettrait de percer les nuages qui cachent l'infini? (p.38-39)

This romanticization of his motives, voiced in lofty language adopted from Leduc's own writings, surfaces throughout the book and may be intended to convey the spiritual intensity of the artist, but it simply diminishes the book's scholarly credibility. Leduc was deeply committed to the inspirational and didactic value of sacred art; surely he viewed this commission as a chance to produce a final work of lasting social importance. Curé Jacob offered him a church with an almost bare interior and a rare chance to "créer en neuf," restricted only by an imposed theme (p.40).

Martin's examination of the mural programme combines icono-

graphic and formal analysis. He adds interesting details about the close collaboration between patron and artist and the long process of designing, executing and installing the murals. This section of the book is well illustrated with interior plans locating the paintings, preliminary sketches, photographs of the work in progress and colour reproductions to show the development of the project. But Martin limits his comments on the preparatory work and reminds the reader that "[l]'émotion plus directe devant les oeuvres accomplies est celle que nous avons voulu partager" (p.86).

Each mural is discussed in relation to the overall theme which is the glorification of God. Chosen by the curé, the subject was inspired by the name of the church; the Presentation of Mary at the Temple signifies her dedication to participate in the Glory of God. A mural of the Presentation is located on the ceiling over the altar, the Divine Glory is represented by a monumental mural of the Holy Trinity that fills the chevet wall behind the altar. Murals of the Annunciation, the Holy Family in the Carpenter's Shop, the Temptation of Adam and Eve and the Temptation of Christ fill the four angled corners of the nave and the Assumption of the Virgin is on the ceiling at the back of the nave. Six murals illustrating scenes of local history and contemporary labour are prominently placed along the nave

walls. Martin discusses some compositions in more detail than others, but his text often reads like lessons in dogma for a public unaccustomed to religious practice. He is at his best when describing Leduc's powerful painting of the Holy Trinity, which took two years to complete. The ascending composition of Christ Crucified, the Holy Spirit and God the Father, majestic as a Byzantine Pantocrator, is bordered by six adoring angels and enveloped in sinuous layers of Art Nouveau-style cloud forms. Scenes from the Old Testament, the Sacrifice of Isaac and the Offering of Melchizedek, flank the base of the central image and prefigure the Crucifixion and the Eucharist. Martin describes how Leduc's unique formal treatment of the mural evokes both a meditative mood and a complex symbolism. The murals suggest the Mystery of the Trinity, God's Creation of the world, the unity between temporal and spiritual realms, transcendence through prayer, and the promise of redemption. The biblical scenes situated in the corners of the nave continue the theme of redemption. The Holy Family in the Carpenter's Shop which faces the congregation also introduces the dogma that "toute vocation est utile, et sanctifiante lorsque vécue selon de justes valeurs" (p.82). This subject is further developed in the regional scenes on each side of the nave representing "la glorification du travail" (p.107).

These six paintings illustrate the work of evangelization, colonization and industrialization, which guided by Providence led to the development of the Mauricie. Père Jacques Buteux, first missionary to the area, is the subject of the central mural on each side of the nave. In *La vision de père Buteux*, the Jesuit stands at the foot of Shawinigan Falls while an angel overhead reveals a vision of the industrial skyline of the future town behind the prominent facade of the church. Flanking this painting are scenes of workers traditionally associated with colonization: *La bucheron* and *Le semeur*. On the opposite nave wall *La mort du père Buteux* depicts the martyrdom of the missionary at the hands of the Iroquois in 1652. Alongside this mural are *Le chargeur de meules* and *Le fondeur de métal*, representing workers in two of the region's largest industrial concerns — pulp and paper and the Alcan aluminum smelter. In each of the four scenes of local work, rays of sanctifying light beam down on the workers from an arched segment at the top of the mural and within this segment, various manufactured products float on sublime clouds, symbolizing the noble fruits of their labours. Small paintings of the Stations of the Cross, the only decoration previously in the church, are integrated into the lower portion of the six nave paintings.

There is certainly more to these exceptional murals than Martin allows.

They clearly narrate the social doctrine and conservative nationalist ideology of the Church in this industrial community. Essential tenets of that ideology can be discerned in the component parts of the programme: the religious mission of French Canadians and the preservation of traditional moral values, social order and the patriarchal family under the guidance of the Church. All the murals are strategically located and interconnect in multiple layers of meaning to teach that submission to God's divine plan will lead to salvation. By preaching a doctrine of subservience, the Church attempted to maintain its dominant position in French-Canadian society, a role seriously threatened by the socio-economic changes resulting from increased industrialization and urbanization. One of the major threats in a region like Shawinigan was the expansion of international unions, which were associated with escalating labour militancy as well as socialism, secularism and anglicization. Catholic trade unions were backed by the Duplessis government and the Church as an urgent defence against international syndicates. The Catholic unions actively promoted traditional nationalist sentiments and an ordered, Church-centred society. Martin mentions that curé Jacob was a union organizer and an associate of "l'ancienne commission catholique des études sociales" (p.107). This is probably the Commission sac-

erdotale d'études sociales, an advisory body to the episcopacy established in 1948 after several years of collaborative meetings with the Catholic union movement. Jacob's affiliation with these organizations (probably as a union chaplain) and his role as parish priest in an industrial community, no doubt motivated his conception of the murals for his church. When asked why there were paintings of local workers in his church where saints were usually depicted, Jacob "explique que le travail est la plus belle expression de la vie chrétienne et que les travailleurs sont des saints en devenir."⁵

There are other intriguing asides. For example, Alcan and Shawinigan Light and Power, major industries in Shawinigan, were among the companies that favoured working with Catholic unions because they were less aggressive than the international unions and therefore provided docile, lower paid workers. A Shawinigan Light and Power brochure (1930) addressed to potential investors stated:

The satisfaction of the French Canadian people is a factor of great importance for employers in this region; the value of human happiness is directly attributable to the wise and good direction of their "father confessors," the Catholic priests. For centuries in this region, the first principle of the habitants' religion has been to be satisfied with

their lot. Local unions are moderate and reasonable in their demands. ...Another important factor for labour availability is the proverbial size of the French Canadian family. Since they all must eat, they must all work, and so the factory has abundant female and male labour on its doorstep; since they all must work, the wages asked for are extremely low.⁶

Alcan contributed \$600 and Shawinigan Light and Power contributed \$1,000 out of a total cost of \$5,000 for the church decoration. (Alcan also donated to the restoration of the murals and according to Martin's acknowledgments, to his book.)

Although the subjects of the decorations were chosen by curé Jacob, Leduc's own social concerns are evident in the programme. In the twenties and thirties Leduc became a prominent social activist in Saint-Hilaire, inspired partly by the Catholic Action movement in Québec and contemporary Christian humanists such as Maritain. His private musings and public speeches reveal views corresponding to the social doctrine of the Québec Church. Echoing the conservative nationalist position, he extolled the spiritual values of rural life and condemned the materialism and amorality of contemporary urban society. He believed deeply in the redeeming power of individual work, a conviction clearly expressed in a speech he gave to

the Union catholique des cultivateurs in Saint-Hilaire in 1930.⁷ His collaboration with Jacob was fruitful and harmonious because they shared similar beliefs.

The decoration of Notre-Dame-de-la-Présentation merits further scholarly study. Leduc dedicated the last thirteen years of his life to the murals and they are a significant measure of his achievements as an artist. Furthermore, the entire commission reflects the ideological conflicts of the period. The programme provides visual evidence of the social thinking which was rebuked in the *Refus Global* in 1948 and by the Asbestos strike of 1949, then cast aside by neo-nationalism in the 1940s and '50s, and finally swept away in the Quiet Revolution of the '60s. If this project was Leduc's "swan song" (p.17), it also marked the last period in which the Church was a dominant force in Québec. Martin's book is designed to explain the mural programme to an audience that presumably no longer understands or appreciates church decoration. A penetrating analysis of this commission would provide further insight into the socio-cultural transformations that fundamentally changed the role of religion and art in Québec society.

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Notes

- 1 J. Craig STIRLING, *Ozias Leduc et la décoration intérieure de l'église de Saint-Hilaire* (Québec: Ministère des Affaires culturelles, 1985).
- 2 Arthur JACOB, *Légendes des tableaux de la décoration en l'église Notre-Dame-de-la-Présentation d'Almaville* (Trois-Rivières: Le Bien Public, 1960).
- 3 Alain-Marie COUTURIER, *Art et Catholicisme* (Montréal: Editions de l'Abre, 1941).
- 4 René BERGERON, *Art et bolchevisme* (Montréal: Fides, 1946).
- 5 René LORD, "Les tableaux de Notre-Dame-de-la-Présentation font partie de notre patrimoine national," *Le Nouvelliste*, 10 janvier 1976, 11.
- 6 Quoted in John A. DICKINSON and Brian YOUNG, *A Short History of Quebec* (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd., 1993), 206.
- 7 Manuscript in the Leduc archives, Bibliothèque nationale du Québec (Montréal), 327/4/3.